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ABSTRACT

This investigation documents the impact of the Van Leer Study, a large-scale evaluation study of achievement in the primary schools of Israel. It is intended to increase understanding of the process of evaluation utilization, showing how evaluation findings and other kinds of information can work together, over time and in a variety of ways, to influence decision making. The Van Leer Study provided a comprehensive review of three major areas: resources and their allocation among the different types of Israeli public schools; student achievement in reading, arithmetic, Biblical studies, geography, and science; and home and school variables associated with achievement. The study was designed for multiple clienteles and was reported in a variety of formats. When released, the evaluation report generated considerable controversy among its major audiences. The ultimate impacts of the lengthy report were that the various groups were led to a closer examination of the issues; that a number of Parliamentary recommendations were made; that a variety of program changes were initiated at the Ministry of Education; that additional research in the form of replication studies and supplementary analyses resulted; and that further study is currently ongoing. (PN)

IMPACT OF A MAJOR NATIONAL EVALUATION STUDY: ISRAEL'S VAN LEER REPORT*

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Introduction

This investigation documents the impact of the Van Leer Study, a large-scale evaluation study of achievement in the primary schools of Israel. It is intended to increase understanding of evaluation utilization, showing how evaluation findings and other kinds of information can work together, over time and in a variety of ways, to influence decisionmaking. The data sources included all relevant primary-source documents reflecting the reactions of individuals, groups, agencies, the press, and the general public to the Report, as well as research publications that cited the Van Leer Study.

General Features of the Van Leer Study

In 1969, a senior faculty member of the Hebrew University School of Education applied for a grant from the Van Leer Foundation to conduct a large-scale survey of the Israeli primary schools. The grant was awarded in 1970, the Ministry of Education provided supplementary funds in 1972, and the final report was released in 1977. There was widespread agreement that such a study was needed, since the annual SEKER examination (an omnibus achievement

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test given in the last year of primary school) was abolished in 1971, creating a demand for an alternative information source on achievement in the primary schools.

The Van Leer Study was designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the Israeli primary school system in three areas: (1) resources (facilities, budget, manpower) and their allocation among various types of schools; (2) student achievement in five subjects (reading, arithmetic, biblical studies, geography, and science); and (3) home and school variables associated with achievement. Thus, though the study took the form of an assessment (a summary of achievement measures), it had evaluative overtones; that is, both the authors and the sponsors of the study expected it to yield inferential judgments about the effectiveness of the Israeli educational system. Of special interest was the success of continuous efforts to raise the achievement level of children of Asian-African origin and to reduce the achievement gap between these children and children of European-American origin.

Although the Report was prepared in a form which fit the needs of the research community rather than of lay readers, the authors had multiple clienteles in mind. To assure that a wide audience was reached, both the Principal Investigator and a Ministry of Education spokesperson prepared summaries. Other audiences were reached through oral presentations. Moreover, prior to publication, brief progress reports were issued from time to time, creating awareness of the importance of the study and arousing interest in its results.

The Van Leer Study was initiated at the highest executive level of the educational hierarchy--the Director General of the Ministry of Education--and was carried out by an independent research team from a university. Thus, many top officials in the system felt that they were the target of the evaluation; that is, that the results would constitute a kind of verdict upon their actions.

The target population comprised pupils in the first, second, fourth, and sixth grades of the Jewish State School System. A stratified random sample was drawn from this population. The total sample consisted of 98 schools, 614 classes, and 17,700 pupils. Two types of variables were considered: (1) student variables (family background, personal characteristics, achievement) and (2) school variables (teacher and principal characteristics, school programs, physical conditions). Data were collected by means of a variety of instruments, including questionnaires and both ability and achievement tests.

The Van Leer Study Findings

The Report itself comprises 18 chapters. Chapter 1-4 are introductory, describing the study's background, objectives, and methodology. Chapter 5-8 present general information on: family characteristics; school facilities, programs, and resource allocations (and their correlation with achievement); the backgrounds and attitudes of teachers and principals; and the personality characteristics, motivation, and attitudes of pupils. The central

section (Chapters 9-14) deals with student performance on various ability and achievement tests. In addition, data are presented for pupil groups classified along two dimensions: (1) ethnic origin and generation, and (2) parents' educational level. In discussing test results, information was provided on the proportion of students making scores of at least 60 percent correct responses (considered by the PI to constitute a "pass" grade). Chapters 15-17 use the achievement data as a basis for examining interrelations between achievement and other criterion variables: Chapter 15 compares level of achievement in various types of schools (e.g., religious vs. nonreligious); Chapter 16 presents a hierarchical model for partitioning the variation in reported achievement test scores; and Chapter 17 pulls together all data bearing on the impact of integration. Chapter 18 is summary, discussion, and conclusions.

In the Principal Investigator's Summary of the Report, findings were clustered into three groups:

- o Equality of resource allocation: There was still a gap between schools for advantaged and disadvantaged learners with respect to both student achievement and resource allocation, despite Ministry efforts to increase resource allocations to "disadvantaged" schools. One conclusion was that "advantaged" schools supplement their budget with parental donations and are more alert in taking advantage of available funds, whereas lack of adequate staff at "disadvantaged" schools prevents them from benefiting fully from the grants allocated to them.

- o Achievement in various subjects: Grades were assigned not only to individual pupils and to student groups but also to the system as a whole: in reading, good; in mathematics and biblical studies, satisfactory; and in science and geography, unsatisfactory.
- o Achievement gap between ethnic groups: Children of Asian-African origin still achieved at a much lower level than children of European-American origin; those of mixed parentage fell between the two groups. The achievement of third-generation Israelis (i.e., those whose parents were born in Israel) was higher than that of second-generation Israeli pupils (those whose parents had immigrated).

The Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education, in a written critique, praised the study generally but criticized several methodological procedures and questioned the validity of some of the findings. This criticism touched on two main points: (1) the conclusions drawn from achievement differences between generations of immigrants (the Chief Scientist said that alternative explanations had not been ruled out; for instance, later immigrants may come from lower educational levels than earlier immigrants); and (2) the legitimacy of making comparisons across subject areas (i.e., stating that pupils had performed better in one subject than in another.

The Principal Investigator defended the Report, the Chief Scientist replied, and the debate occasionally took on a personal tone; this aspect received excessive attention from the press.

The release of the Report was eagerly awaited both by the research and educational communities and by the general public. Shortly before its release, two seminars (both on educating disadvantaged students) were held, calling further attention to it; though neither seminar was directly addressed to the Report, some of the findings were leaked at these seminars, thus creating more anticipation. Once in print, the Report still faced two hurdles: (1) the parliamentary elections that took place in March 1977; release was delayed so that the Report could not be exploited for campaign purposes; and (2) the time needed for the Chief Scientist to review and critique the voluminous Report. Some newspapers accused the Ministry of trying to pigeonhole the Report because of findings unfavorable to the educational system. Thus, when it finally was released, the Report became a best seller, and the first 1,000 copies disappeared rapidly.

The Impact of the Van Leer Study

Early reactions to the Report came from various groups, all of which tended to look at the study not for what they could learn from it but for what it told them about their own pet issues. They tended to distort the findings to support their own particular views. The study findings elicited frustration because they were taken to indicate lack of progress in the school system.

Newspaper stories tended to be sensational rather than analytic. Two examples show the press' distorted treatment of the study findings. First, the press labeled the religious schools "inferior" to the nonreligious schools because of raw score

differences in student achievement, without taking into account differences in the student input of the two types of schools. Second, differences in achievement between integrated and non-integrated schools were used as evidence against the merits of integration.

On June 27 and 29, 1977, about a month after the Report was released, the Knesset devoted a debate to the implications of the study. The political context was complex and delicate, since a coalition government had just taken office and a new Minister of Education, from the National Religious Party, had been installed. Thus, the debate took on political overtones, when two members of the left wing of the Labor Party expressed the fear that the new Minister would use the study findings to increase the time devoted to religious study in the schools, taking time away from secular studies. The Knesset debate relied heavily on comparative data about various grade levels and subjects, even though the Chief Scientist had criticized these findings. The character of the debate illustrates that, when readers do not fully understand the presentation of findings, they will substitute their own simplified version. In other words, scientific jargon invites erroneous interpretations.

The Pedagogical Council of the Teachers Union, which concerns itself with all matters pedagogical, devoted several sessions of its annual seminar to discussing the implications of the Report, inviting presentations by the research team and the Chief Scientist. Questions raised at these sessions centered on those

policy implications of particular interest to the participants: e.g., grade repetition, ability grouping, extension of the school year. The substantive findings tended to be ignored.

After the first flurry of heated reaction, a kind of moratorium was called, allowing time for interested parties to check on the current validity of the findings, as well as to consult about what action should be recommended. The Knesset called upon its Educational Committee to consider the Report, and the Ministry of Education formed an ad hoc committee to study the findings in more detail. For about two years, while these committees were carrying out their assignments, little was heard about the Van Leer Study.

The Knesset Educational Committee devoted four sessions to the Report, hearing testimony from various experts, including the research team. Then it appointed a subcommittee of six Knesset members, who worked for 27 months, holding eight formal sessions and visiting schools for disadvantaged learners. The subcommittee also issued invitations for external comments (i.e., from faculty members at schools of education or teacher training institutes, from the general public), but response was poor. Only one school of education team turned in a written comment, and about 10 other people responded (representatives of private institutions, authors, and teachers), all of whom had their own axes to grind. On December 19, 1979, at a plenary session of the Knesset, the subcommittee presented 12 "suggestions for resolution" clustered into five groups: (1) resources, (2) curriculum, (3) the learner and his family, (4) teachers, and (5) principals.

The Ad Hoc Committee of the Ministry of Education consisted of four members: the Chief Scientist, plus three other Ministry officials responsible for monitoring the primary school system and implementing recommendations. This committee in turn created six subject-area subcommittees (reading, mathematics, geography, science, biblical studies in nonreligious schools, biblical studies in religious schools) and a resource allocation subcommittee. The former (each consisting of five or six members, usually teachers and curriculum experts) examined test items to check their validity and adequacy. All but the science subcommittee were satisfied with the content validity of the items. Several of the subject-area subcommittees opposed the Report's suggestion that the curriculum was overloaded. All of them endorsed the establishment of a set of core requirements for each subject area, probably by way of ratifying a decision that had already been made by the Standing Committee for Primary Education. The resource allocation subcommittee, after studying the data, recommended that, in the future, each ministry department be required to report its activities in such a way as to indicate their contribution toward improving the situation in schools for the disadvantaged.

Another important impact of the Van Leer Study was that it prompted additional research of two types: replication studies and supplementary analyses. The replication studies (carried out to see if the system had changed since 1973, when the Van Leer data were collected) covered two areas: resource allocation and achievement. In the first area, the Raziel Bulletin (1978)

indicated that there had been increases in the resources allocated to both advantaged and disadvantaged schools, that the latter had achieved parity on some resource variables, but that gaps still existed. This last finding prompted the Ministry of Education to initiate yet another study (Davis and Sprinzak, in process) which, though not yet completed, seems to indicate that further progress has been made in equalizing resources. In the area of achievement, the Jerusalem District Achievement Survey (limited to the reading and mathematics achievement of fourth-graders in the Jerusalem School District) showed no improvement in mathematics achievement and only slight improvement in reading achievement since 1973. The second type of research (carried out between 1977 and 1980) mined the data base in the Van Leer Study to throw light on issues not covered in the Report. For instance, Cahan (1977) used the data to check for possible teacher discrimination against pupils of Asian-African origin; he found no evidence of discrimination. Peled's secondary analysis of intelligence test data (1980) found that the two ethnic groups differed in their intellectual ability patterns.

When the committees had completed their work in 1979, several further administrative and legislative steps were taken. The Ad Hoc Committee of the Ministry of Education pulled together the suggestions of its subcommittees and issued a document containing 36 recommendations, which served as a basis for discussion at various forums within the Ministry. These recommendations were general policy statements, exhortative in tone, that did not really offer operational details, although they were directed at

the specific departments which would be responsible for implementing them. The Educational Committee of the Knesset approved the recommendations of its subcommittee and presented them to the full parliament on January 1, 1980, asking that the Minister of Education respond within six months. On July 28, 1980, the Minister presented his response, outlining the steps that had been taken to implement the recommendations: allocating more resources to disadvantaged schools, establishing more adult education programs, paying higher salaries to teachers of the disadvantaged, and setting core requirements.

In a sense, the Van Leer Study has not been completed, since its effects are still being felt. People discussing particular educational issues still refer to the Report, and its influence on certain decisions made within the school system is clear. Researchers continue to mine the data base, and school administrators continue to protest that its findings are not up-to-date and that further progress has been made.

Achieving Impact

The literature distinguishes several different types of evaluation use, including instrumental use (when evaluative information is used directly in making programmatic changes), conceptual use (when evaluative information influences policymakers' thinking without having any direct effect on action), and symbolic use (when an evaluation is conducted for symbolic purposes: e.g., to satisfy the requirements of external agencies). In addition, one may distinguish various levels of use (e.g., the national

level, the school district level, the classroom level). Finally, the impact of an evaluation may be immediate and limited or gradual and cumulative. The uses made of the Van Leer Study findings were primarily conceptual (and, to a more limited degree, instrumental); they occurred at the highest level of the system; and the overall impact was gradual and cumulative.

Several factors (some of them mentioned in the literature on evaluation utilization) seemed to enhance the impact of the Van Leer Study:

1. Technical Quality of the Report. The Van Leer Report was generally praised for its technical quality and methodological rigor, even by those who criticized specific aspects of it. The research literature indicates that methodological rigor is a necessary but not sufficient condition for utilization.

2. Involvement of Prominent Scholars. The study was also accorded credibility because a large group of scholars--experts from both the Israeli and the international research communities--participated as ad hoc consultants at various stages, not only contributing directly to the quality of the study but also helping to assure its acceptance and to minimize sharp criticism against it. While the research literature frequently mentions report credibility as an important factor, most observers tend to see it as an extension of the personal credibility of the evaluator.

3. Characteristics of the Evaluators. One of the reasons the Van Leer Study received such attention was that the Principal Investigator had acquired a national and international reputation as a dedicated researcher, a charismatic speaker, and an

ardent advocate for his pedagogical ideas. The research literature mentions the importance of the evaluator's characteristics in influencing impact, usually focusing on such characteristics as credibility, orientation toward providing user information, and rapport with audiences. In this case, the personal dynamism of the Principal Investigator was the most outstanding evaluator characteristic.

4. Interested Users and Critical Issues. Since the Van Leer Study had been requested by the Ministry of Education, there was every assurance that attention would be paid to its findings at the highest level. Moreover, the study addressed critical issues, topics of concern not only to policymakers and educators but also to the general public; this further assured that it would be highly visible. The evaluation literature notes both these factors as important.

5. Complementary Data. The findings of the Van Leer Study were consistent with the findings of another large-scale study (carried out by the prestigious Etzioni Committee) and thus gained additional credibility. As various observers have pointed out, an evaluation tends to be seen as valuable when it adds new dimensions to, or substantiates, data already available.

6. Antecedents of Report Publication. Various events preceding the release of the Report--including frequent progress reports, "leakage" of some of the findings at seminars, and the direct involvement of hundreds of teachers and thousands of parents--contributed to the interest it aroused.

7. Institutionalized Mechanism for Impact. The existence within the Israeli Ministry of Education of the Office of the Chief Scientist--who is responsible for translating research findings into recommendations for action--further guaranteed that the findings would be utilized. Some observers have noted other such organizational mechanisms that facilitate impact.

Several other issues arise in connection with the impact of the Van Leer Report and deserve some mention.

First, there is some truth to the charge that the Report was oriented more toward the research community than toward the lay reader; but so are most reports of large-scale surveys. Perhaps such a study should produce several reports, aimed at different audiences and written in different forms and styles.

Second, the overwhelming amount of information presented in the Report makes for difficult reading and created some confusion. Perhaps it would have been preferable to focus the study on a more narrow range of issues. Yet the very scope of the study, and the plethora of data it produced, carry certain advantages: (1) some unexpected findings emerged about unknown phenomena; (2) the Report serves a "handbook" function, enabling the reader to extract information about emerging issues and to obtain baseline data on the details of broad topics; and (3) the peripheral data summaries help support the major findings.

Third, the prodigious size of the Van Leer Report had several consequences not anticipated by the authors: (1) it laid the basis for a moratorium on action, delaying official acceptance (or rejection) of the recommendations but at the same time

allowing policymakers and educators more time to consider the findings and to think seriously about Israel's educational problems; (2) it allowed the data to be exploited to support conflicting views; and (3) it allowed the data to be interpreted, in some cases, in ways that directly contradicted the authors' intentions. The lesson to be learned here is that, when it comes to controversial issues, authors might be well advised not only to state what conclusions <u>can</u> be drawn from the findings but also to make explicit what conclusions <u>cannot</u> be drawn.

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